DECISION NOTICE

AND

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

PALOMAR MOUNTAIN VEGETATION TREATMENT PROGRAM

Palomar Ranger District

Cleveland National Forest

San Diego County, California

August 2013

DECISION AND REASONS FOR THE DECISION

The Palomar Mountain Vegetation Treatment Program proposes to conduct vegetation management activities on 3,054 acres within five general project locations of the Palomar Mountain area. These projects include the continued maintenance on an existing fuelbreak system along Aguanga Ridge and four forest health projects on Palomar Mountain.

Fuelbreak maintenance activities along the Aguanga Ridge include use of prescribed fire, mechanical, and manual vegetation treatments on 1,687 acres. Primary vegetation treatments are conducted within the fuelbreak zone through controlled burning to maintain a light fuel load level within the fuelbreak area. Mechanical treatments are limited to mastication and/or tractor crushing.

Proposed forest health projects include manual and mechanical treatments followed by pile burning and/or prescribed burning on approximately 1,367 acres. Dependent upon vegetation conditions, treatments may include thinning, trimming, and piling, followed by chipping and/or pile burning. Understory prescribed burning may also be conducted as a final treatment.

The overall landscape area that the proposed project is located within has been subjected to numerous wildfires, which are a natural process in chaparral ecosystems. For over 50 years, the Forest Service has attempted to reduce the threat of wildfires within southern California national forests primarily through a program of regular prescribed burning and construction of wildland fuelbreaks.

Fuelbreak treatments are being proposed to achieve the following:

- Maintain the continuity and functionality of a pre-existing fuelbreak system.
- Reduce the threat of wildfire to adjacent communities, public property and natural resources.
- Increase firefighter safety during area ingress, egress and fire suppression activities.
- Provide opportunity for backfire and burn-out operations to create holding line, reducing the need for dozer and hand line construction.
- Provide an effective fire suppression strategy to protect areas with a negative fire regime condition class (areas with condition classes that are higher than natural fire frequencies.
- Provide an effective fire suppression strategy to protect areas of mature vegetation with a positive fire regime condition class (areas with condition classes that approximate natural frequencies).
- Indirectly aid fire suppression efforts to protect communities where land ownership patterns, location of the project areas, or topography limit the applicability of the wildland-urban interface defense zone concept.

Forest health restoration treatments are being proposed to achieve the following:

- Reduce potential wildfire threat to the community, public facilities, and natural resources of Palomar Mountain.

- Integrate and complement Forest Service vegetation management activities with past, existing and future vegetation management activities on private and state lands within the Palomar Mountain area.
- Restore the use of controlled periodic fire as an important component in the forest ecosystems that are fire-dependent.
- Improve forest health and the ability of the forest to withstand drought, insects, pest, and disease, as well as the possible effects of climate change.
- Protect and enhance sensitive wildlife species that depend on mature mixed conifer habitat, including the California spotted owl.

This project is consistent with both the Forest Service's National Strategic Plan and the Land Management Plan (LMP) for the Cleveland National Forest. In addition, a National Strategic Plan Goal is to reduce the risk from catastrophic wildfires. The specific goals of the project include:

Community Protection
Goal 1.1: Improve the ability of southern California communities to limit loss of life and property and recover from the high intensity wildland fires that are a natural part of this state's ecosystem (LMP Part 1, pg. 19).

Restoration of Forest Health
Goal 1.2: Restore forest health where alteration of natural fire regimes have put human and natural resource values at risk (LMP Part 1, pgs. 20–21).
Goal 1.2.1: Reduce the potential for widespread losses of montane conifer forests caused by severe, extensive, stand replacing fires (LMP Part 1, pgs. 22–24).
Goal 1.2.2: Reduce the number of acres at risk from excessively frequent fires while improving defensible space around communities (LMP part 1, pg. 25).
Goal 1.2.3: Maintain long fire free intervals in habitats which are slow to recover (LMP Part 1 pg. 28).

Biological Resource Condition
Goal 6.2: Provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired nonnative species (LMP part 1, pg. 44).

Decision

Based upon analysis presented in the Palomar Mountain Vegetation Treatment Program Environmental Assessment (EA), documentation found in the project record, and my review of all alternatives, I have decided to select Alternative 2 for implementation. The selected alternative will conduct vegetation management activities on 3,054 acres within five general project locations of the Palomar Mountain area. These projects include the continued maintenance on an existing fuelbreak system along Aguanga Ridge and four forest health projects on Palomar Mountain.

Palomar Mountain Vegetation Treatment Program- Project Area Descriptions

Site Name and Acres	Project Type	Legal Description
Main Fuelbreak: Aguanga Ridge – 1,095 Secondary Fuelbreaks: Highpoint - 203 Cottonwood - 190 Observatory – 74 Butterfield – 125	Existing Fuelbreak Maintenance	R1E, T9S, Sections 11, 14, 13, 18, 24, 27, 26, 25, 30, 31 R2E, T9S, Sections 32, 29, 28, 21, 33 R2E, T10S, Sections 5, 4, 3, 10, 2, 11, 12
Birch Hill – 77	Forest Health - Ecological Restoration and Fuel Reduction	R1E, T10S, Section 14
East Grade – 248	Forest Health - Ecological Restoration and Fuel Reduction	R2E, T10S, Sections 20, 17
Palomar Station – 108	Forest Health - Ecological Restoration and Fuel Reduction	R1E, T9S, Sections 27, 28
Fry Creek - 934	Forest Health - Ecological Restoration and Fuel Reduction	R1E, T10S, Sections 4, 5

This decision will provide maintenance to approximately 1,687 acres of existing fuelbreaks that were originally constructed in the 1970s for the purpose of meeting wildland fire control objectives. In addition, it would maintain/or restore forest health and reduce hazard fuels on 1,377 acres where conifer mortality has combined with undergrowth and heavy chaparral fuel loads to create a wildland fire threat to both human development and the natural resources. There will be zones of reduced fuels surrounding the Wildland Urban Interface that will provide lower fire intensities in the event of the next wildfire. This work will be done in cooperation with the San Diego County Fire Department, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection ("CALFIRE") local fire safe councils, and local community property owners. The project is within the Palomar Ranger District of the Cleveland National Forest, in San Diego County, California and is generally approximately 20 air miles north of Ramona, California, near Palomar Mountain.

Aguanga Fuelbreak System Treatments

Fuelbreak maintenance activities include use of prescribed fire, mechanical, and manual vegetation treatments on 1,687 acres. Primary vegetation treatments are conducted within the fuelbreak zone through controlled burning to maintain a light fuel load level within the fuelbreak area. Mechanical treatments are limited to mastication and/or tractor crushing. This involves the cutting and mulching of live vegetation to within 2" of the ground. The purpose of this treatment is to reduce the continuity of heavy fuels within chaparral habitat found within the existing fuel break system. Mastication/mulching will be performed in a mosaic pattern with irregular perimeter edges and islands of vegetation for wildlife cover, vegetative recruitment, and aesthetic values. Manual treatments include use of chain saws and other hand methods for thinning, limbing, and piling primarily of understory fuels. Controlled grazing with goats may also be utilized in order to control re-sprouting of brush and grasses. The overall maintenance objective is to treat approximately 20% of the fuelbreak area annually.

Forest Health Treatments

Proposed forest health projects include manual and mechanical treatments followed by pile burning and/or prescribed burning on approximately 1,367 acres. Dependent upon vegetation conditions, treatments may include thinning, trimming, and piling, followed by chipping and/or pile burning. Understory prescribed burning will be conducted wherever possible. Mechanical treatments will be limited to down material piling and/or mastication of dense areas of understory vegetation. This involves the cutting and mulching of live vegetation to within 2" of the ground. The purpose of this treatment is to reduce the continuity of heavy fuel loads. Mastication/mulching will be performed in a mosaic pattern with irregular perimeter edges and islands of vegetation for wildlife cover, vegetative recruitment, and aesthetic values. Forest health treatments are designed to thin and remove dead, dying, and overstocked trees in the understory, reduce hazardous fuels (particularly understory ladder fuels), and enhance native vegetation communities. The long term goal is to maintain previous treatment investments and restore a more naturally functioning forest ecosystem that will better withstand wildfires. These projects will also enhance public and firefighter safety and support fire suppression actions.

The project is proposed for implementation over a 5-year period. The proposed average annual treatment could range from 100 to 400 acres. Approximately 20% of each fuelbreak will be treated annually. Treatments can occur any time of the year so long as required design measures and Best Management Practices are implemented.

Project Design Features

The following section describes features designed to avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential resource impacts. Their purpose and effectiveness are described in their respective resource sections in Chapter 3 of the EA. This decision will be implemented in a manner consistent with Land Management Plan standards, goals, strategies, and program emphasis. In addition, Best Management Practices are also required measures and are listed in Appendix A of the Soil and Hydrology Resources Specialist Report of the EA. The following project design features are part of this decision.

Project Design Features

Design Feature	Description
Fire and Fuels	
Fuel reduction treatments were developed based on site-specific needs based on the current fuels and vegetation conditions and desired fire behavior. Primary focus is to reduce ground and ladder fuels and a discontinuous overstory canopy.	
FUEL-1	*Hand piles—* a) Hand piles would average six feet in diameter and six feet or less in height; piles would be a maximum of ten feet in diameter. Hand piles should be placed at least 25 feet from the center line of stream channels. b) All material piled would be bucked to facilitate construction of piles. Piles would be located away from residual snags or live trees to protect them during burning of the piles. Piles will be located away from downed large woody debris to minimize or avoid burning. Piles would be located and lined as needed to prevent the spread of fire from one pile to the next. Hand pile specifications would be based on planned season of burning (winter or late spring).
FUEL-2	Direct prescribed burn ignition will not occur in riparian conservation areas. Fires will be allowed to back into these RCAs in order to minimize risk of excessive loss of ground cover.

Design Feature	Description
FUEL-3	22 acres of the Birch Hill treatment area are in the WUI defense zones. This area has been previously treated to reduce fuels. The chaparral vegetation would be treated again under this project to retain a maximum 18-inch height of vegetation 100 to 300 feet beyond structures (Forest Plan, appendix K).
Air Quality	
Project design with regard to air quality includes compliance with the Clean Air Act, as regulated by the South Coast Air Pollution Control District, to minimize cumulative effects.	
AIR-1	Various smoke reduction techniques may be employed to reduce emissions of smoke from a prescribed burn. The techniques used for prescribed fire include the following: a) Burning under conditions that reduce the biomass that is consumed while achieving burn objectives. This can be accomplished by burning at high fuel and duff moisture levels, limiting burning of large stumps and coarse wood, and burning concentrations of fuel. b) Constructing and preparing hand piles so that they would burn with a minimum of smoke. Techniques include covering piles to keep them dry and construction methods to limit soil incorporation into the piles. c) Burning during favorable weather conditions when smoke is transported away from sensitive locations. Spring burning has advantages of higher fuel and ground moisture, atmospheric instability, and good transport winds. Fall and winter burning can restrict emissions and smoke to the ground level if burning takes place under the inversion layer. d) Handpile burning above fall or winter inversion layers can direct smoke away from sensitive locations. e) Avoidance of impacts. Ignitions would be slowed or stopped when meteorological conditions change to cause intrusions of smoke into sensitive areas. This may also include burning on low visitor use days in the spring and avoiding burning on high use weekends. Spot forecasts of weather in the project area would be used to ensure favorable "within prescription" weather conditions for the burn and for smoke transport. f) Planning and providing for implementation of contingency actions to be taken if smoke impacts occur or meteorological conditions change or go out of prescription.
AIR-2	A smoke management plan would be submitted to the local air quality district to obtain applicable permits. Daily smoke monitoring would occur and compliance to permissive burn days would be followed.
Botany (Sensitive Species and Invasive Weeds)	
BOT-1	In all treatment units where known populations are to be protected, Forest Service personnel will designate the location of the population site prior to commencement of project activities to ensure the site is located and protected. Priority invasive plant infestation areas identified before or during project implementation, within the treatment units or along travel routes near the treatment units, will be manually or mechanically treated or "flagged and avoided "in order to avoid spreading of invasive species as a result of the project activities.
BOT-2	Burn piles and fire lines will not be constructed through invasive or sensitive plant species occurrences. Mastication equipment or other heavy equipment will avoid invasive species and sensitive plant populations.
BOT-3	Project design features related to invasive weeds serve to prevent the introduction of new weed species and the spread of existing weed species. The Regional Weed Prevention Measures Guide would be followed to minimize potential for introduction and spread of noxious weeds. The following standard contract language can be included in all service contracts: USE OF STATE OF CALIFORNIA CERTIFIED WEED FREE HAY, STRAW, AND MULCH USED IN THIS CONTRACT. (8/2006) Notwithstanding other provisions in this contract and unless otherwise agreed in writing, any hay, straw, or mulch used in this contract shall be State of California certified weed free. EQUIPMENT CLEANING. (6/2006) As needed, these measures would include cleaning

Design Feature	Description
	equipment so that vehicles, tires, footwear, and tools are weed-free prior to entering the project area. Where work occurs in areas of known weed infestation, personnel would clean equipment to avoid transporting weed seed into un-infested areas. Weed-free means that visual inspection does not reveal soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold weed seeds.
BOT-4	Staging areas for equipment, materials, or crews will be prohibited in areas with invasive plant infestations.
BOT-5	Chipped and masticated vegetation would be left on site and utilized to reduce soil erosion and to inhibit or reduce germination and establishment of non-native plants.
Heritage Resources	
HR-1	Heritage sites would be protected in compliance with Land Management Plan direction, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Programmatic Agreement between the Cleveland NF and the State Historic Preservation Officer.
HR-2	The Cleveland NF heritage program manager must be notified at least 15 days in advance of any mechanized operations to arrange monitoring.
HR-3	Prior to any project implementation activities, all previously recorded sites would be flagged by a qualified archaeologist to include a buffer zone of approximately 10 meters around the outside of the boundary of each site. No ground disturbing mechanical or manual activities would be allowed within this buffer zone.
HR-4	Prescribed burning would not be allowed within archaeological site boundaries. However, fuels may be hand-cut within the site to meet fuels objectives. Cut material will be hand-carried to burning locations outside of the designated boundaries. Dragging of cut material will not be permitted in order to minimize any potential site disturbance.
HR-5	All mastication conducted with heavy equipment would be monitored by a qualified archaeologist that meets the Secretary of the Interior standards for archaeologists conducting cultural resource management on federal property. A monitoring log and summary report documenting the results of the required monitoring would be prepared by the individual or firm conducting the required monitoring and submitted to the Cleveland NF heritage program manager within 30 days of completion of proposed project activities that require monitoring.
HR-6	Rock outcrops would be avoided during the proposed mastication process. No tracked vehicles would traverse or remove brush within the immediate vicinity of bedrock outcrops.
Hydrology/Soils/Aquatic Habitat	
HSA-1	**HSA-1 Large Organic Matter:** Protect existing Coarse Woody Debris by having ground-based equipment avoid larger diameter logs as much as practical.
HSA-2	**Ground cover**: Forest Restoration Treatments: At least 50% cover would be retained as fine organic matter (less than 3 inch material). See ground cover requirements for two RCAs below (HSA 5). Fuelbreak Treatments: Soil cover should be maintained to support soil stability while still achieving fuel reduction goals. Fuelbreak maintenance with grazing by goats: To maintain effective soil cover, retain residual dry matter (RDM) of 600 pounds per acre (LRM utilization standard for WUI/Fuelbreaks).
HSA-3	**Mechanized Equipment Slope Limitations:** All tractor skidding will be restricted to slopes ≤ 30%. Ground based mastication equipment will be restricted to slopes ≤45%. Exceptions to these limits would be allowed only after field evaluation by a watershed specialist determines soil quality standards would be met following treatment.

Design Feature	Description
HSA-4	**Riparian Conservation Area (RCA) Delineation and Management** Delineation: RCAs will be established to protect aquatic habitats in the project area. Determination of RCA widths would be per direction in Appendix E of the Land Management Plan (LRMP Part 3) and are located adjacent to project area aquatic habitats as described in the following table:

Treatment Area	Protected Feature	RCA Width
Fry Creek	Fry Creek and seasonally flowing and two seasonally flowing streams tributary to Fry Creek	100 m along Fry Creek high water mark and 30 m on either side of high water mark of seasonal streams
East Grade	1 seasonally flowing channel tributary to WF San Luis Rey streams	30 m on either side of high water mark of channel.
Birch Hill	2 seasonally flowing channels tributary to Cedar Creek	30 m on either side of high water mark of channel.
Aguanga Fuelbreak	Seasonally flowing channel tributary to Rattlesnake Creek; seasonally flowing headwaters of Kohler Creek	30 m on either side of high water mark of channel.

If additional seasonally flowing channels (or springs or other aquatic habitats) are identified during project layout, they will be protected with RCAs of the 30m.

Management: Retain ground cover within RCAs as follows: East Grade and Fry Creek: 60% ground cover due to high soil erodability. Within RCAs of Forest Restoration treatment areas, retain snags and downed logs unless they are identified as a threat to life, property, or sustainability of the RCA. Vegetation reduction within the riparian conservation areas would be limited primarily to ground and ladder fuels. Leave all woody riparian (alders, willows, etc.) vegetation. Conifers less than 14" could be removed to meet fuels reduction goals. Retain all logs located in stream channels, unless they are identified as a safety hazard to personnel during project implementation.

Tractor piling would not be allowed in RCAs. Heavy equipment for mastication or brush crushing would not be operated in the inner half (15m) of RCAs (50m for Fry Creek). A masticator arm would be allowed to reach into this zone of equipment exclusion as practicable. Hazardous accumulations of dead material may be hand cut with chainsaws anywhere within RCAs.

Do not allow grazing of goats within any streamside zone or riparian conservation area (grazing is intended to maintain desired fuel management objectives on existing ridgetop fuelbreaks.

Land Lines	
LL-1	Prior to initiating fuel treatments adjacent to private lands, the private property lines will be flagged or otherwise marked to avoid inadvertent trespass.
Recreation	

Design Feature	Description
REC-1	Prepare and implement Traffic Safety and Control Plans prior to commencing project operations. The Plan will provide for public safety on Forest Service controlled roads and trails open to public travel.
REC-2	Developed campgrounds, roads and trails open to the public will be kept open or only closed for short durations. Project activities will minimize conflicts with public use on weekends and holidays.
REC-3	Prescribed and pile burning would be conducted during the low use recreation seasons. (This is typically outside the period from Memorial Day thru Labor Day weekend.) Use of heavy equipment and chain saws within or 0.25 mile of developed recreation sites, recreation residences, special use permit holder facilities and private land facilities will also be limited to the low use recreation season and after 7AM.
REC-4	Retain residual trees and brush in developed recreation sites where it provides important screening between units. Chipping is the preferred method of fuel treatment within developed sites. Prescribed broadcast burning or underburning would not be permitted within the designated boundaries or within 150 feet outside the designated boundary.
REC-5	Treatments in East Grade Project Area will be limited to hand treatments in order to protect the Barker Valley Inventoried Roadless Area. No mechanical/vehicular entry will occur during project implementation.
Scenery	
SCEN-1	Where topography and vegetation conditions allow, fuelbreaks would be maintained in a non-linear pattern leaving pockets of retained vegetation and scalloped or feather edges.
SCEN-2	*Treatment of unnaturally-appearing soil disturbance*— Smooth piles of soil created by machinery or any other soil disturbance from machine piling within 75 feet from the following roads and units associated with the following key viewing areas: County Roads S6, S7 and the interior roads of Fry Creek and Observatory Campgrounds.
SCEN-3	*Road actions*— Where project activities could increase unauthorized OHV use, barriers and signing would be installed. Where possible, untreated vegetation would be left to minimize access.
Wildlife/Habitat Diversity	
TES Species- . Provide appropriate protection measures for federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species, regional forester listed sensitive species within the project area. The following species are included:	
Laguna Mountains Skipper Habitat Protection	
WILD-1	Potentially suitable Laguna Mountains Skipper (LMS) larval habitat consists of sunny to partly sunny areas with patches of the primary larval host plant, Cleveland's Horkelia (*Horkelia clevelandii*). Prior to any project actions that may disturb any LMS larval habitat, all such areas shall be clearly marked (e.g., flagged) by a qualified biologists for avoidance, project personnel shall be informed or trained to successfully comply with avoidance, the marking shall be maintained until no longer needed, and it shall then be completely removed. The potentially suitable habitat occurs in the East Grade and Palomar forest health treatment areas. These areas are mapped and documented in Appendix A of the Forest Health Biological Assessment for Wildlife and Botanical Resources (ICF 2011a).
California Spotted Owl (CSO) Protection	
	No activities are proposed that would modify or remove suitable CSO nesting/roosting or foraging habitat.
WILD-2	Fry Creek treatment unit includes a California Spotted Owl Protected Activity Center (PAC). • In the conifer vegetative type in this area, retain (where available) at least 9 down logs per acre of the largest logs available. • Retain 4 to 8 of the largest snags available per acre, or at least 20 square feet per acre of

Design Feature	Description
	basal area of snags greater than 15 inches dbh and 20 feet tall. • Snag and downed log retention should be averaged across the landscape. • During prescribed burning operations within PACs, provide adequate on-the-ground monitoring of burning operations to help ensure that key CSO attributes are protected in the event that prescribed fire burning conditions or behavior threaten these attributes.
WILD-3	Maintain a limited operating period (LOP) prohibiting activities within approximately 0.25 miles of a California spotted owl nest site, or activity center where nest site is unknown, during the breeding season (February 1 through August 15), unless surveys confirm that the owls are not nesting (Forest Plan, S20).
WILD-4	To protect current overstory canopy closure, limit tree removal to trees less than 14 inches dbh and in the suppressed and intermediate tree positions (below the overstory canopy).
Quino Checkerspot Butterfly Habitat Protection	
WILD-5	Any known occupied or suitable habitat below 3,000 feet elevation within the Aguanga Ridge and associated fuelbreak system will be treated manually and under a limited operating period. USFWS will be consulted prior to any treatments within known occupied habitat.
FS Sensitive Species	
Snag and Leave Group Retention	
WILD-6	In areas outside of Wildland/Urban Interface Defense Zones and fuelbreaks, retain soft snags and acorn storage trees unless they are a safety hazard, fire threat, or impediment operability.(Forest Standard S17)
Habitat Diversity	
WILD-7	During fuelbreak treatment and treatments in forest health areas, retain and protect the following species: Ponderosa, Jeffrey, and Coulter pines; California Black Oak; Bigcone Douglas fir. Examples of such protection measures include clearing of fuel concentrations around the base of trees and avoiding direct lighting of prescribed fire adjacent to the base of trees.
WILD-8	Emphasize retention of clumps of mature chaparral vegetation where this retention does not compromise fuels management objectives [note: the Birch Hill treatment area received previous fuels treatments during the 2007 wildfire and is primarily in need of maintenance treatments to continue to meet desired conditions].
Grazing Management	
Ensure that any grazing by goats (for fuelbreak maintenance) is consistent with forest standards and guidelines.	
RM-1	**Implementation of Forest Standard S56 (Livestock Grazing Utilization Standards):** Ensure that goat grazing adheres to the required retention of RDM as described in Table 3-2 (Forest Plan, Part 3, Appendix J, page 12).

When compared to the other alternatives, Alternative 2 will allow flexibility for meeting the purpose and need for the project while protecting resources. This alternative also meets Land Management Plan direction along with other applicable laws, regulations and policies.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, Alternative 1, the No Action alternative, was considered. Alternative 1 was not selected because it did not meet the stated purpose and need for the project. Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No fuelbreak maintenance work or forest health restoration work would be implemented to meet the purpose and need for action. This alternative would not reduce the very high risk of wildfire to the communities of Palomar Mountain, Sunshine Summit,

Oak Grove, and Aguanga and other nearby residents, and to specific values that are within and adjacent to the project area. These specific values include the old growth conifer forests and chaparral shrublands, Birch Hill community, Palomar Mountain Wildland Fire Station, Mission Indian Reserve, Palomar Mountain County Park, Palomar Christian Conference Center, Palomar Mountain State Park, Watersheds for Lake Henshaw and Vail Lake, and the Palomar Observatory. As described in the EA (Section 3.3.2.2), these communities and values would continue to endure the very real risk of wildfire, as demonstrated by the fire history and ignition risk in the area. In addition, taking no action would not improve firefighter, public, and community safety in the event of a future wildland fire, nor would it protect important wildlife habitat, and improve the resilience of forests to withstand natural events such as drought, insect attacks, wildfire, and diseases. Further, fuelbreak efficacy would continue to decline as fuel loadings increase.

Alternatives Considered But Not Analyzed in Detail

No other alternative were considered, as the No Action and Proposed Action alternatives fully addressed the concerns raised during the scoping process, and no significant issues were identified.

Public Involvement

Public scoping for the project began with a listing of proposed actions in the Cleveland NF Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOP A) in the quarterly October-December 2009 listing. Detailed proposal information was provided through a scoping letter mailed to adjacent landowners, local, state, and federal agencies, interested organizations, and individuals on October 18, 2010. Input was requested to be sent to the Palomar Ranger District by December 1, 2010. Other public involvement efforts include interactions with neighboring state, county, and federal agencies including the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection ("Cal Fire"), Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, local fire safe councils, and the San Diego Department of Planning and Land Use. Additionally, a public meeting was held at the Palomar Ranger District Officer in Ramona, California, on Thursday, November 18, 2010, at 6:30 p.m. to share information about the projects and to receive public comments. Using the comments from the scoping process and public involvement efforts, the interdisciplinary team evaluated the list of concerns and potential issues to address in the range of alternatives and did not identify any significant issues that necessitated the development of alternatives to the Proposed Action.

A legal notice of the 30-day draft EA comment period was published in the San Diego Union Tribune on November 30, 2012. Comments received during the comment period did not raise any significant issues, and Forest Service responses to those comments can be found in Appendix A, attached to this decision notice.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that actions associated with the selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the quality of the

human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

a) The context of proposed actions is confined to a total of approximately 3,054 acres of actual treatment (1,687 acres of fuelbreak treatments and 1,367 acres of forest health treatments) . Implementation of proposed actions will be spread out over time. Similar activities have been occurring across the Cleveland National Forest without significant impacts. Even in a local context, this proposal will not pose significant short- or long-term effects. Project design features included in this proposal minimize and avoid adverse impacts. Any impacts that may occur are within acceptable levels, even at the local scale. Proposed activities are consistent with all Cleveland National Forest Land Management Plan standards and guidelines.

b1) My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.

b2) There will be no significant effects on public health and safety because the project will be governed by standard public health and safety contract clauses. Regional air quality standards will be met for any pile burning or small area broadcast burning. Potential short-term effects from burning are of limited scope and duration and have been minimized to the extent possible through timing and emphasis on various smoke reduction techniques.

b3) There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area because cultural resources will be protected (EA, Table 2-3, Sections 3.6.3 and 3.6.4). Land Management Plan guidelines for riparian conservation areas will be met, providing protection for aquatic habitats (EA, Table 2-3, Sections 3.9.3 and 3.9.4). The project area does not contain parklands, prime farmlands, or wild and scenic rivers.

b4) The potential for adverse effects have been minimized to the point where there are few effects to draw controversy. Consideration was given to the long-term beneficial effects of the project. Through continued involvement and discussion with interested publics and regulatory agencies on other projects across the Cleveland National Forest, controversy over environmental effects was minimized during project design. No significant issues were raised during public involvement efforts that necessitated the development of alternatives to the Proposed Action (refer to *Issues* section of Chapter 1 in the EA).

b5) The project was designed to achieve desired conditions identified in the Forest Service's National Strategic Plan and the Land Management Plan for the Cleveland National Forest (EA, Chapter 1). It implements design features (EA, Table 2-3) to minimize potential for adverse resource effects. Local expertise in implementation of these types of projects minimizes the chance of highly uncertain effects, or effects, which involve unique or unknown risks. Proposed activities are routine in nature, employing standard practices and protection measures, and their effects are well known. (EA, Chapter 3).

b6) The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because any future decisions would be based on consideration of relevant scientific and sitespecific information available at that time.

b7) Cumulative impacts are not significant (EA, Chapter 3).

b8) The action will have no significant adverse effect on cultural resources identified, including the one eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, provided that the Standard Resource Protection Measures (SRPMs) (outlined in Section V of the Interim Protocol) and the specific resource protection measures described in the EA (see Chapter 2, Table 2-3) are implemented. Historic preservation compliance has been met and documented. Consultation requirements under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act have been fulfilled as outlined in the "First Amended Regional Programmatic Agreement among the USDA FS, Pacific Southwest Region, California State Historic Preservation Officer, and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and in the Interim Protocol for Non-intensive Inventory Strategies for Hazardous Fuels and Vegetation Projects" (SHPO 2004). Consultation has also taken place with interested Native Americans and local Tribes to identify potential conflicts. No conflicts were identified.

b9) The action will not adversely affect any threatened or endangered species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 ("ESA") because the project would not affect the continued existence of any fish, wildlife, or plant species potentially affected by this project and protected under ESA; and the proposed project is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability of species identified as sensitive by the regional forester (EA, Sections 3.4.3, 3.4.5, 3.4.6. and 3.5.4).

b10) The action will not violate federal, state, or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Cleveland National Forest Land Management Plan (EA, Section 1.3).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to implement Alternative 2 to conduct vegetation management activities on 3,054 acres within five general project locations of the Palomar Mountain area is consistent with the intent of the Cleveland National Forest Land Management Plan long-term goals and desired conditions (LMP, Part 1, pp. 19 to 31). The project improves the ability of southern California communities to limit loss of life and property from wildfire (LMP, Part 1, pg. 19, Goal 1.10).

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the

Appeal Deciding Officer at: Appeal Deciding Officer, William Metz, Forest Supervisor, USDA Forest Service, 10845 Rancho Bernardo, Suite 200, San Diego, CA 92127, (858) 673-6180. Appeals may be submitted by FAX to 858-673-6192, or by hand-delivery to the Cleveland National Forest Supervisors Office, at the address shown above, during normal business hours (Monday to Friday 8:00am to 4:30pm). Electronic appeals, in acceptable (e.g., plain text (.txt), rich text (.rtf) or Word (.doc)) formats, may be submitted to mailroom: **r5 cleveland@fs.fed.us** with "Palomar Mountain Vegetation Treatment Program appeal" appearing in the subject line of the email.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the San Diego *Union - Tribune*, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45-day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the San Diego *Union - Tribune* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Individuals or organizations who submitted comments during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Jeff Wells, Resource Officer, Palomar Ranger District Office, 1634 Black Canyon Rd, Ramona, CA 92065; Phone (760) 788-0250 ext. 3342.

Joan Friedlander

JOAN FRIEDLANDER
District Ranger

8-1-2013
DATE